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Into the Vacuum: Being the Chiurch in the Age of Barbarism, Gordon Scoville

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Book Reviews

Markus McDowell,
Eleanor Daniel, Editors



Gordon Scoville, *Into the Vacuum: Being the Church in the Age of Barbarism, Christian Mission and Modern Culture*, ed. Alan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin, and Wilbert R. Shenk (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), 128 pages. Reviewed by Stanley N. Helton.

The Christian Mission and Modern Culture series, produced by the Institute for Mennonite Studies, treats various aspects of the church in modern society. The series purports three goals: (1) to examine modern/postmodern culture from a "missional" viewpoint; (2) to develop theological agendas to help the church regain its integrity; and (3) to offer fresh "conceptualizations" on the "nature and mission of the church as it engages modern culture." Consequently, contributions to the series are experimental, providing religious professionals and practitioners a "forum where conventional assumptions can be challenged and alternative formulations explored" (p. viii).

Gordon Scoville argues that the church "has stepped into a process that involves disintegrating into a moral vacuum from which the only exit is to become the church of committed disciples" (p. 10). Scoville confesses:

I am concerned that too many pastors and ecclesiastical officials have a vested stake in remaining unconscious of the historical vortex that can swallow us into something that bodes a very ugly future. Evangelism in America, in other words, will be harder than most of us ever imagined, for the reason that we ourselves are so largely captured by a status quo that depends for its existence on the destruction of things such as Christian mission. (p. 11)

Scoville accepts a standard Anabaptist interpretation of history: pristine Christian beginnings, the Constantinian fall, an incomplete Reformation, and now, in postmodern America, "the final unraveling of the Constantinian-Theodosian Establishment" (p. 51).

Based on his experience as a pastor of a mainline denomination (unnamed), Scoville uses historical narrative and theological reflection to draw the reader into his concerns. He argues that American mainline denominations are tightly tied to an American culture that is rapidly deteriorating. Consequently, the church's identity has eroded to the point that today it often stands for nothing. In other words, Christians can no longer distinguish Christian values from those of American culture at large. Scoville offers several vignettes to illustrate that the American church has lost its Christian identity (pp. 12-13).

American mainline denominations have forgotten that the church came into being to worship God, that Christians are by definition disciples, and that truth will offend in a society whose ultimate value is toleration (pp. 51-52). Unless the church in America shakes loose from the dominant culture and reclaims its theological center, the cultural vacuum will be siphoned into the church as well.

Scoville observes that churches today generally do not articulate covenant expectations for membership. Nor do most Christians understand and live out any sense of a covenant relationship with God and certainly not with others (pp. 75–76). Consequently, Christianity is reduced to the lowest common denominator—each person can believe privately whatever he or she chooses as long as no attempts are made to bind together around shared beliefs. Correspondingly, responsibility and accountability are rare if not altogether nonexistent. Yet church leaders complain of widespread apathy toward the church—displayed by stagnant worship attendance, recycling of volunteers through various ministries, and the like (pp. 54–55). These overriding trends are prevalent in most American mainline denominations.

Even less favorable is his view that current evangelical church-marketing upstarts (fundamentalists, Pentecostals, or charismatics) offer only superficial responses to the moral predicament of America and that they are themselves fused to American culture, thus likewise driven by the dominant culture of power and domination (pp. 60–66).

The way out is for the church to be(come) the church—not only to teach the right things but to do “right by Jesus Christ.” In “the church” Scoville envisions the “free church” of the Anabaptist tradition (p. 70). The church then must unashamedly and resolutely “affirm a distinctive Christian identity.”

A discerning congregation (since Scoville does not see any denomination as a whole doing this) would need to stop (for at least a year) “to

de-fuse our relationship with culture by canceling the organizational practices that reproduce the fusion” (p. 68). During the respite, the church could study the Bible and pray, and thus recover biblical repentance. Only then could the church be the “contrast culture” that God intended. Two practices of the contrast culture might be cell groups, to reestablish Christian community, and classic spiritual disciplines. Scoville rightly acknowledges that even cells can be subverted, becoming a “foundation for empire building and mega-formation” (p. 80) rather than a crucible of discipleship.

Scoville’s historical narrative should raise the historian’s critical eye: Are we really to believe that William Jennings Bryan’s Populist Party was America’s last chance to have a public morality (p. 25)? Despite his overestimation of the moral vision of the Populist Party, the author convincingly argues the historical relationship leading from the rise of bureaucratic efficiency to the demise of a common public morality. He grasps fully the tension between bureaucracy and the freedom of the individual. Thus he correctly notes that a mere reduction of American political history into simplistic Left-Right polarization falls headlong into James Hunter’s “cultural war.” There is indeed a “war,” but “neither side of the supposed polarity constituted enough internal coherence to represent a consistent adversary” (pp. 35–36).

Scoville’s understanding of the success of the civil rights movement is as rosy as his estimation of the current state of the American church is gloomy. The civil rights movement,

while making some necessary changes (and not enough of those), did not move American society nor the American church far enough or deep enough, as Scoville would suggest. Some justification can be made for seeing the black church as an expression, at least for a time, of “strong local countersocieties” (p. 73), but even they did not go far enough, because today they remain black churches, not countercultural churches seeking the salvation of all people.

Scoville’s style is loquacious bordering on arduous, and he has an odd fixation on the Latin word *cum* (with), which he awkwardly uses at least six times (e.g., “biblical-cum-republican morality,” p. 81). Other than a brief reflection on Ecclesiastes (pp. 44–46), his engagement with the biblical text is cursory (see pp. 72–77).

Granting the author’s free-church perspective, his diagnosis is accurate. However, on the prognosis side of his case, he leaves the reader hanging. (The author’s argument leans far more toward theoretical description than pastoral prescription). If Scoville is right that the church must be the church and needs to be de-fused from culture-bound organizational practices, would it not then follow that he would have to leave the mainline denomination that he does not name? How many churches are going to toss their church boards onto the garbage heap? Scoville is analyzing the vortex from within the vortex.

The question, How can the church be other than culture-bound? does not find an answer here. Scoville assumes that it indeed must be. Without distinguishing between theological vision and historical real-

ity, we are never sure when the church is truly the church—or are always assuming that the church is never the church.

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THREE SHORT DEVOTIONAL REVIEWS

BY ROBERT LOWERY

G. K. Chesterton once observed, "Critics are madder than poets. And even though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his visions, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his commentators." This observation, made more than sixty-five years ago, is more than applicable to many of the writings on the book of Revelation that are being published as we enter a new millennium. In this brief review, I would like to recommend three books for your consideration, one more than sixty years old and the others written in the last few years.

In July 1939 Professor William Hendriksen received the first trade copies of *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker; paperback, \$12.99). It is a study that remains in print to this very day, influencing countless believers, and should not be overlooked even after all these years. Indeed, it is a work that changed my reading of the book of Revelation—if not virtually my entire understanding of eschatology. It is what I call a big-picture book. Rather than confounding the reader with an examination of trees and leaves, Hendriksen enables the reader to see the entire forest. The book's clarity, warmth, simplicity, and exegetical and theological soundness are timeless, providing a helpful guide for all, layman and professional alike.

Two recently published books

will also be helpful in bringing some sanity back to an age that seems obsessed with antichrist and Armageddon, tribulation and timetables, Israel and Iraq, rapture and resurrection, and with the fear of being "left behind." Both of these books remind us that the last entry in the Bible contains a powerful message for any millennium. In 1988 Eugene Peterson, then preacher and now retired professor, wrote, in my estimation, the finest devotional commentary of this century—*Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988; paperback, \$13.00). It takes its place alongside the nineteenth century's finest devotional work on Revelation, Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1893). The prose of both writings reads like poetry at numerous points. Like Hendriksen, Peterson the poet presents the big picture of Revelation. However, unlike a traditional commentator, he takes a thematic approach to Revelation, "the most famous last words spoken or written." It is the word *last* around which Peterson shapes his chapters, from "Famous Last Words" (introducing the theme) to reflections of the last word on scripture and Christ (Revelation 1), the church (Revelation 2–3), worship (Revelation 4–5), evil (Revelation 6–7), prayer (Revelation 8–9), witness (Revelation 10–11), politics (Revelation 12–14), judgment (Revelation 15–18), salvation (Revelation 19–20), heaven (Revelation 21), and last words (Revelation 22).

Consider the following statements, illustrating Peterson's rich insights:

Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. Witness is not an option. There are no *emeriti* in the work of witness. The safest place to be is on the battlefield with

Christ. If we don't want God, or don't want him very near, we can hardly be expected to be very interested in heaven.

You will want to quote him time and again.

The year 1996 saw the publication of Scotty Smith and Michael Card's study of Revelation entitled *Unveiled Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson; hardback, \$16.99). If Peterson is the poet, Smith and Card are the preachers. Card is a well-known Christian musician whose compact disc *Unveiled Hope* features lyrics inspired by the book of Revelation set to beautiful, Celtic-flavored music. Card teamed up with preacher-friend Smith to write this thoughtful commentary. Smith's astute and succinct observations dominate the book. He weds the background and foreground admirably, showing first how Revelation was a message of hope to Christians who were being either persecuted or seduced by their culture at the end of the first century, and then how it speaks to us with equal force and relevance as we enter a new millennium. Like Peterson, Smith covers large sections of Revelation without getting bogged down. Sample chapter titles include "From the Word: The Hope of an Occupied Throne" (Revelation 4) and "From the Word: The Hope of Purposeful Suffering" (Rev 6:1–8:1). Card appends at appropriate points his reflections as a musician, thereby linking both written and sung words found in the book and on the compact disc. (It would benefit the reader to become a listener at appropriate points, reflecting on the musical message found on the CD). No sensationalism here—only good, solid exegesis and application that will stir the heart and challenge the mind.

A professor. A poet. A preacher. In their writings on Revelation, these men are ultimately prophets in the sense that they help us hear God

clearly and sanely in the midst of the sensationalistic writings of this moment in history. Truly, these books will not end up in closeout bins because events have proven them wrong; their comments are timeless and universal. Indeed, all three authors are pastors who seek to guide us through the cacophony of confusing voices often associated with Revelation so that we can arrive safely at home with God. They are in agreement with Rossetti, who concluded her work with the following words: "We have heard enough when God ceases to speak, and have learned enough when we have learned His will."

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Larry Paul Jones and Jerry L. Sumney, *Preaching Apocalyptic Texts* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999). Reviewed by Myron J. Taylor.

The church today faces a number of problems that can be resolved only by patient study, sound exegesis, and thoughtful exposition of scripture. That is most surely the case with those portions of scripture having to do with eschatology, especially where such teaching is expressed in apocalyptic imagery. Far too many congregations hear preaching that is not critically informed, that gives little or no attention to literary genre or theological content.

The coming of a new millennium heightens our awareness of eschatology (the doctrine of last things). Some preachers major in eschatology, while others never mention it at all. This book calls upon the church to reclaim this part of scripture at this particular moment in

history because too many interpreters are using it to make claims about the immediate future, particularly events around the year 2000, which the literature does not support. Jones and Sumney show us how to preach the Bible's apocalyptic texts while avoiding the most common mistakes of using an overly literal interpretation of highly symbolic and metaphorical passages to predict present-day political events. This book opens up some of the most perplexing texts in all the Bible. There are chapters on texts from Daniel, Mark, 1 Thessalonians, and Revelation. Each passage is addressed in a brief exegesis, a sample sermon, and notes on particular aspects of the text.

The authors are professors at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky. Jones is assistant professor of homiletics, and Sumney is associate professor of biblical studies. Jones authored the chapter on preaching apocalyptic and all the sermons. Sumney wrote the important chapter on the introduction to apocalyptic and the exegesis for each text. As much as I appreciate what these professors have done, I wish we had more preachers who were capable of writing such books. We need to return learning to the pulpit.

The first three chapters are essential to the proper approach to these texts. "The Problem of Preaching Apocalyptic Texts" develops both the necessity and the challenge of preaching such texts and suggests an approach for how to do it. Chapter 2, "Apocalyptic Thought," is absolutely necessary for anyone who attempts to preach these texts. Apocalyptic is a literary genre, a frame of mind, and a view of history. To preach these texts one needs to understand that. Chapter 3, "Characteristics of an Apocalyptic Preacher," develops a theology of preaching—how it all

comes together consistently in the sermon. These texts are actually intended to preach Christ as the other parts of scripture preach Christ. One has to learn how to handle the weird imagery. To be literalistic is to miss the whole point.

The culture of our time is rather short on hope. There is good reason to be seriously concerned about the future. The Christian faith is eschatological: concerned about what lies ahead—the last things. Much of eschatology is expressed in apocalyptic. Preachers need to learn how to handle such texts so Christians can understand the nature of their hope. To make that possible, preachers must preach sermons that inform, that teach, that open up this whole area of Christian thought. Much of the confusion we face as a new millennium dawns is due to the failure of so much current preaching to teach the church the proper understanding of this literature of hope. Apocalyptic is and must be a part of the Christian community's self-understanding.

This is a book for preachers, teachers, leaders, and intelligent members who want to understand their faith. The only effective answer to the wild speculations of some in our time is a patient, informed, persistent teaching ministry. A carefully selected bibliography for further study would have been useful to this book. Some help in this regard can be obtained from the references in the notes. The book is a basic primer, but a significant one, and I urgently recommend it to all readers of *Leaven*.

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